

# Health Promotion Practitioner

Practical solutions for health enhancement programming

## 8 Irrefutable Laws of Health Promotion

While a healthy lifestyle constitutes only about 7 relatively simple activities, health educators have struggled for years to attract and retain people in programs that teach and reinforce them. Part of the difficulty is going against human nature — it's easier, and more gratifying in the short term, to sit around than go jogging or to grab a bag of chips than shop for and prepare fruits and vegetables.

But another reason more people don't participate, at least initially, is we're not very good at appealing to their interests. Here then are 8 laws for promoting health that, if ignored, are sure to limit participation in your services.

1. *It's better to be new, fresh, exciting, sexy than it is to be better.* We go to great lengths to build a better mousetrap in health promotion, believing if we devise the perfect risk appraisal process or counseling technique that we'll somehow convince nonparticipants to join. In reality, people are attracted more to new, fresh, exciting, sexy than they are to the MS, RD, PhD, MD, CHES, FAWHP after the instructor's name. Image is everything, and if your programs don't appeal to the image your clients want, all the double blind studies behind your service won't mean a thing.
2. *Respect takes time.* Health promotion can be pretty low on the list of valued employee benefits (14th, just ahead of casual dress policy, in one study). But over time, quality services centered on what people want and are ready to act on will gain the level of respect needed to produce mass participation and widespread perceived value. Only when we ignore preferences and program instead from the position of what we think they need (based on our analysis of risk and claim data) do we fail to achieve the long-term respect needed for growth, additional funding, and appropriate staffing.
3. *You can't be all things to all people.* If you try, you'll fail. Most health promotion programs we know are understaffed and underbudgeted. Yet they're still trying to offer a broad range of services and options that require twice the resources they have. The result is mediocre participation, delivery, and results. In many cases, you're better off scaling back and putting more effort into promotion, ensuring value, and measuring impact. If you do cut back, it's even more vital that you do the right things — not necessarily what you like to do, but what your clients want.
4. *You can't predict the future.* If you're using last year's claim or healthcare cost data to predict what people will respond to in terms of your health promotion offerings, you'll be successful only if you're very lucky. Tomorrow's changes at work, home, in the community, and within individuals are unknown. You can only go on what people tell you is important to them today. If you're not asking, testing, refining, and delivering on what people care about, you may stumble upon the right formula. But it's more likely you'll appeal to a narrow slice of your population and have limited benefit to the organization.

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5. *Success is bad.* Success in and of itself isn't bad, but it can lead to bad habits — especially if the success resulted from dumb luck. But wait a minute, you say, I work very hard and my hard work resulted in the success. Maybe so, but health promoters often have no idea why something produced high participation. For example, one health promoter we talked to recently had more than 80% participate in a screening at a remote location, when the same service at other locations had historically produced 25%. Assuming they had done a better job of promoting, they began staffing up for higher levels. When participation returned to the typical 25%, they went back and interviewed participants at the 80% site and discovered a rumor had circulated — only those who went through the screening would be eligible for promotions (which makes you wonder about the 20% who didn't participate). Here's the point: don't just accept that you're brilliant when you're successful — find out what worked and why, so you can replicate it.
6. *Failure is good.* At least on a small scale. If you cut your losses early, learn why you failed, and commit to never making the same mistake again, little failures can be very valuable.
7. *Hype hurts.* For years health promoters and academics touted the healthcare cost-saving virtues of health promotion. And we have dozens of studies to “prove” we're reducing healthcare expense. But when management buys into that argument and we fail to deliver, we're hung out to dry. Apply caution to the current emphasis on health promotion's contribution to productivity. If you can't prove it, or at least reasonably draw rational conclusions based on what you accomplish, don't hype your services on something they may not deliver. Better to focus on perceived value, participation, and change in health behaviors than to predict influence over things you may not be able to control.
8. *Successful programs are built on trends, not fads.* Fads rise and fall in near annual cycles. In fitness we've gone from the “exercise till you drop” phase, where we tried to make 10K runners or Jane Fonda clones of everyone, to the “push your vacuum around with vigor” nonsense of the most recent surgeon general's report on physical activity. In between is the more sustainable, rational approach of encouraging people to dedicate time to get out and move every day, and enjoy it.

Take time today to review your program and principles against these important guidelines. 🇺🇸



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